

Given the harm that Brexit will do to the UK, why are they insisting on going ahead with it?



Answer

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Answered Nov 18 · Upvoted by [Tony Jackson](#), lives in The United Kingdom (1981-present)

Several things here. **First** and most obviously, a chain of events happened that makes it difficult for any government to avoid at least pretending to go ahead with Brexit. There were six parts to this:

1. A government that promised to institute a referendum on the controversial issue of our EU membership, won a majority in 2015
2. Then both government and parliament voted to have the referendum
3. Then the referendum was had
4. Then parliament voted to invoke Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and the government duly did
5. Then 80% of the population voted in a general election in 2017 for a party promising to abide by the result of the referendum
6. Then in 2018, parliament passed the European Community (withdrawal) Act 2018

That's essentially six separate decisions made by one or other of our democratic institutions, either preparing the way for our exit from the EU, or deciding upon it, or activating the decision. A valid reason for not insisting on going ahead with it would require a separate justification for declaring the invalidity of all six of them.

The **second** point is this: the Prime Minister Theresa May has decided not to go ahead with Brexit. You may have read the news in the past week or so, about the deal she's agreed with the EU.

It grants supremacy of the European Court of Justice over the UK. It involves a commitment to remain in the customs union, until the EU gives the UK permission to leave it. It permanently surrenders the unilateral Article 50 right to leave the EU and replaces it with a veto by the EU, of the UK's de facto EU membership.

The deal effectively creates a new status of EU membership: a second-class of EU membership. One for naughty nations, if you like. It isn't called EU membership but involves most of the costs of EU membership, with a few of the benefits.

Now of course, Theresa May would not put it like that. She would say she's fulfilling the verdict of the 2016 referendum to leave the EU. She isn't telling you the truth. She's decided to remain in the EU by essentially replicating all its laws, putting a different badge on a collection of most elements of the existing relationship, and calling it new.

This by the way, is symptomatic of the rot that's infested UK politics for the past 30-or-so years. Rebadging something and saying "job done" is an EU trick. We were justly appalled

when the EU rebadged its unpopular Constitution as the Lisbon Treaty but we do the same and we have done here. It's part of the same mind-set that gave us code-based regulation, where what matters isn't the outcome, but a tick in the box. It stands in contrast to the mindset we're more familiar with here, of form over substance and outcome based regulation.

That our political system has yielded a British prime minister who thinks she can fulfil the result of the biggest democratic exercise in our nation's history by putting a different label on the current relationship — and then denying that's what she's done — just shows how much our politics has become owned by this corrosive mindset.

The **third** point is, the statement in the question that Brexit will do harm to the UK, simply isn't credible. Well, except in the very short term because of the drag on the economy imposed by the uncertainty, and because of transitional effects. But this is only about the short term of around 5 years or so. I daresay most of us vote with a longer time horizon than this. 5 years is a pretty short period of time in the context of our or our children's lifetimes.

There was a fascinating article by Niall Ferguson in today's Sunday Times who argued that for all his faults, Henry VIII got his approach to Europe pretty much right.^[1]

In the days when religion was everything, we used to be governed by Rome in much the same way in which today, we're part of a more secular European empire. Henry VIII pulled us out of that in Brexit Mk. I. Any historian will tell you what an unseemly mess that was. While no modern politician can endorse his motives or methods, his resolution and sense of purpose have much to commend them.

And I think most would agree Brexit Mk. I worked out alright in the end.

The statement that Brexit will "harm" the UK is so easily disproven that you must be a true believer not to see it. Europe is the worst performing economic bloc in the world and has been for decades. As this report pointed out^[2] the reasons for Europe's poor long-term record can be traced back directly to the EU and its policies. The

report argued that the EU's policies are responsible for harming investment, innovation, competitiveness and productivity.

To make a credible case for how we'll be "harmed" by Brexit, you need to make a valid case for what we'll have lost by not being in the EU. This is where things start getting vague. What exactly do we stand to lose? I'm still waiting for a properly articulated answer.

I suppose you could make a case for saying we lose all the "rights we've enjoyed" by means of EU membership, like the freedom to live, study and work in the EU. Fair enough but every person's right is someone else's obligation. A proper case evaluates the right vs the cost of the obligation and a valid counterfactual. As for the counterfactual, there's a remarkable symmetry: around 1.3m British citizens live in each of the EU, the USA and Australia. That's right. Twice as many British people live in the USA and Australia combined, as live in the EU (outside the UK, of course).

What about the EU's precious single market and customs union? Spare me. People wax lyrical about these two great cornerstones of European achievement. But nobody ever seems to have much of an idea what's so great about it. Frictionless trade? Trade's more or less frictionless under a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). And every WTO member has the obligation under the Trade Facilitation Agreement to remove trading frictions that remain.

Sure, under an FTA you have to do customs declarations but what's so much harder about that than a VAT return, something all British companies do except the very smallest? What's the big deal about customs when only 2% of consignments get checked and average wait time is only 6 minutes? A moment's reflection on these facts shows that all the dire warnings about how integrated supply chains will get destroyed by customs checks is a load of old baloney.

Tariffs? What's so great about a customs union that forces British consumers to pay above world prices for imports to protect inefficient producers in places like Italy and France?

Trade deals? The EU has FTAs with 30 countries, only two of which (South Korea and Canada) are anywhere close to being important UK trading partners.

The idea we'll have lost much by leaving the EU Single Market doesn't stand to reason. If it did, you'd think there'd be at least one study out there singing its praises. But most of the formal studies out there say much the opposite. You'd also think every country in the world would be busy trying to copy it. But nobody is. The economist Harry Western summarises his findings in a report referenced below, that the EU single market had achieved nothing at all in services and in goods, no more than a common-or-garden FTA. ^[3]

I'd therefore summarise my answer to the question by challenging both of its key premises:

1. Brexit won't harm the UK. There is no plausible case for that whatsoever, except for short term transitional effects

2. The UK's leadership has chosen not to go ahead with Brexit.

Footnotes

[1] The Tudor approach would execute Brexit

[2] http://ec.europa.eu/economy_fina...

[3] The Limited Impact of EU Membership on Barriers to Trade